

THE RAVEN

Proposal for a one-hour documentary

A portrait, a history, and an oratorio of the paragon of the air. The raven is the biggest songbird, with a length up to 66 cms, and a wingspan over a metre. It has a greater variety of calls than any other creature in the world. Can mimic the sounds of other birds, dogs and human beings. Its highly glossed black plumage shines with iridescent greens, blues and purples.

Its aerobatics are beyond compare. It will rise on an updraft, soar with liquid strokes, and suddenly fold its wings and drop like a stone for 20 metres, then spread its wings again and somersault two or three times before levelling out. It can also roll over laterally, and fly upside down.

No other bird can match its adaptability, which allows it to inhabit anywhere in the northern hemisphere--on arctic ice flows, on the frozen tundra, in deciduous forests, in hot deserts, even in some urban areas, where it lands on abandoned buildings, church steeples, and high tension wires.

It is primarily a scavenger, but is also a predator. It associates with any animals that kill large game--polar bears, grizzlies, wolves, coyotes, killer whales, human beings. It can steal other birds' eggs and nestlings. It opens oysters, clams and mussels by dropping them onto rocks and roads. It helps the farmer by consuming vast numbers of insects, cutworms and vermin. It buries caches of surplus food, but when carrion becomes scarce in the winter, it migrates to towns to scavenge in human garbage. One raven can goad a dog into chasing it while its partner steals the dog's bone.

The raven can live for 20 years. It prefers to nest on cliff-ledges, in tall coniferous trees or in highrise buildings. It mates for life. Both sexes build the nest and feed the young. Nests are re-built by succeeding generations, and can last for a hundred years.

Curiosity motivates playfulness--e.g., sliding down snowbanks head-first, provoking dogs, investigating human inventions like shoe-laces and windshield wipers, loosening snow on sloping roofs to fall on passersby, etc.

It keeps a safe distance from human beings, whom it doesn't trust. Therefore very hard to get to know. This very mystery has inspired more mythology and literature than any other bird in creation (for example, Genesis 7 in the Old Testament, Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" and "Macbeth", Dickens' "Barnaby Rudge", Poe's "The Raven", Richler's "Solomon Gursky Was Here"). It is the mainstay of many of the ancient legends of Greece, Rome, Asia and Africa, where it is mostly an agent of gloom, while for the native people of Siberia and the northwest coast of Canada, it is the symbol of life and creation.

For the Haida of the Queen Charlotte Islands, Raven is the great Trickster, who decided to bring amusement to the world that God had created by dividing the land into mountains and valleys, and then filling the land with animals that were divided into male and female. All the unpredictable changes that have taken place since then can be accounted for by the Raven's antics.

Raven the Trickster is the main inspiration for the work of the great Haida sculptor Bill Reid, who has said, "Raven is the force that keeps the world turning. He goes through eternity turning over rocks to see what's underneath. He is the spirit of curiosity, which has led people into more new circumstances than any other character trait." And Haida scholar Daniel Bogert-O'Brien adds, "Raven's capriciousness helps us avoid believing that we can fully understand the cosmos, which is surprising and wild and transforming. He moves across the boundaries we set up".

During my 30 years of travel as a director-cameraman, I have watched the raven at work and at play in all continents and temperate zones of the northern hemisphere, including North Africa. My fascination for him is not only because of his extraordinary physical and social capacities, but also because of the range of different roles he plays as a metaphor for cultural identity in societies around the globe.

I propose to do one month of preliminary research primarily in the area of Lake Memphremagog, where I have got to know ravens over the 68 summers that I have spent in a family cottage on that lake. I would develop an outline for a treatment to be used as the basis for more detailed research in other areas of the world where I want to shoot the film: in the Charlotte Islands of British Columbia; in the volcanic hills around Tepetzlan, Mexico; on glaciers near Resolute Bay in the Arctic; in the Cotswold Hills of Gloucester, England; in the streets of St. Petersburg, Russia; and in the cliffs of Dogon country in central Mali.

For this first outline, I would also seek the advice of the following people: (1) Bernd Heinrich, the biologist at the University of Vermont whose book "Ravens in Winter", published in 1988, established him as the world's leading expert on the living habits of ravens; (2) Peter Matthiessen, the American naturalist and novelist ("At Play in the Fields of the Lord", "The Snow Leopard", "In the Spirit of Crazy Horse"), who has described the raven as "that great requiem bird of myth and legend, most wonderful of all wild creatures"; Jean O'Neil, Quebec naturalist and writer from Sherbrooke who knows Lake Memphremagog well; (4) Haida scholar Daniel Bogert-O'Brien in Vancouver; and (5) Jacques Hétu, the Quebec composer of "Les Abîmes du Rêve", the beautiful score for baritone and orchestra written to celebrate the poetry of Emil Nelligan. I would hope to persuade Hétu to write a musical score for this film in the form of a rhapsody for small orchestra.

Martin Duckworth
March, 2000

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1. Synopsis

A one-hour documentary film in the form of a combined visual poem and anthropological study of a bird whose beauty, intelligence, playfulness, ravenous appetite, and powers of survival have given him mythical status in most cultures of the northern hemisphere.

The film would be inspired by the work of native artists like Bill Reid in British Columbia, of biologists like Bernd Heinrich in Maine and Vermont, and of writers like Peter Matthiessen in New York and Jean O'Neil in Sherbrooke, as well as by the orchestral programme music of Jacques Hétu in Montreal. It would be shot in Quebec, British Columbia, the Canadian Arctic, Mexico, England, Russia, and Mali. The format would be super-16mm or high-definition video, with the possibility of expanding a one-hour TV treatment into a 35mm blow-up of feature length.

2. Budget

Travels around Montreal, Magog and Sherbrooke.....	\$750
Travels to Bangor and Burlington to see Heinrich.....	750
Travel from Vancouver to Charlotte Islands to see Haida artists (Montreal-Vancouver travel covered by another production)...	750
Office expenses (phone, fax, post, paper, etc.).....	250
Salary for five weeks.....	7500

	\$10,000

3. Schedule

Travels--July-August, 2001

Writing--September, 2001